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ABSTRACT

Dropout classification systems must be standardized, updated, and simplified to accurately reflect conditions of student departures from school; current, nonstandardized systems allow gathered data to be biased and of poor quality. Improvements will inform administrators of the specific causes behind students' early withdrawals--whether students drop out due to problems with boredom, social isolation, malice, maternity, or informal suspension--and eliminate from the dropout statistics, students who have left for steady employment, familial moves, or other educational opportunities. Telephone interviews with 958 students who exited the school system between October 1, 1986 and September 30, 1987, who had neither graduated nor transferred revealed that: (1) non-college-bound students make up 53 percent of the dropout rate; (2) two-thirds of all students leave school in midterm; (3) non-college-bound students are more likely to enter employment situations, while college-bound students pursue further education; (4) a number of dropouts were either informal suspensions or had been made to understand return was unwelcome; and (5) many did not know how to reenter school or were unaware of alternative education. Accurate data gathering would allow administrators to provide exit counselling, use alternatives to informal suspensions, and distribute exit packages that would advise students of available educational and community services. (KM)

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ACTION RESEARCH ON DROPOUTS

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OBJECTIVES

This presentation is intended to report on two closely related topics: first an attempt to develop a frame of reference for the study of high school dropouts which would have wide acceptance among school board based researchers throughout the Province of Ontario, Canada and; second, the impact of studying the dropout situations in a moderately large urban school board.

PART ONE

Early in the Spring of 1987, the Province of Ontario undertook a major initiative to learn more about the problem of young people leaving high schools before completion. There was a great felt need, particularly in the political sphere, to discover the scope of the problem, its causes, and the possibilities for correcting the situation. The Minister of Education commissioned George Radwanski, an attorney who at the time was also the editor of one of Canada's major newspapers to take on the task of unearthing this information.

At the time, I couldn't help but wonder about the quality of data sources that Radwanski would have available. Initial efforts to ascertain the number of students dropping out of the 17 high schools within my own board revealed many inadequacies and possible sources of bias in the collection and communication of data on students who dropped out. A quick check with research colleagues around the province showed that my board's situation was not unique, and that any province wide study which relied on dropout data gathered at the school board level would be suspect because of the quality of the available data. Data gathered still further from the source would be even more suspect.

In response to this situation, AERO - The Association of Educational Research Officers of Ontario - convened an informal "committee on dropout data" which began wrestling with the complexities of definitions and procedures used in the collection of these data.

Following the committee's first meeting in the fall of 1987, AERO members were asked to provide information on how their boards collected data on early school leavers, including 1) the definitions under which the data are classified, 2) how the data were actually gathered, 3) who had responsibility for entering the data, etc. Information was gathered from 14 large school districts.

In January 1988, this group met again to share the information that had been gathered and determine what actions if any should be taken. The concerns which originally prompted AERO to look more closely in this area were confirmed. There were indeed a variety of theoretical and practical or procedural problems associated the with the gathering of dropout statistics.

Problems of Definition

Everyone involved in public education is aware that some per cent of students leaves school without achieving any formal recognition of completion. When we try to quantify the magnitude of this situation, we find substantial differences in the rules used for counting who is a dropout and who is not. Among school boards in Ontario there was no uniform method for establishing the rate of early school leaving that was generally accepted as valid. Part of the difficulty was logically bound up with a shift from the way we had thought of dropouts in the past and the way we think about early school leavers today. We think of the term "dropout" as having a pejorative tone. Desiring to avoid these negative loadings we moved toward a less loaded term "early school leaver". By refocusing the issue in this way, we can see that leaving school early might not always be a such bad thing after all. This introduces the question of who should be counted.

Clearly, not all early school leaving should be counted as part of a problem. There are for example youngsters who leave before the system recognizes their completion and go directly into community college, university, or relatively stable jobs. Still others may be leaving to part time status at another high school, night school or special youth training program.

Even among those youth who leave school for less good reasons, there are some who leave for medical or legal reasons and who should perhaps not be counted in the same way as the youngster who leaves out of boredom, isolation, malice, or even as a result of maternity or "informal suspensions".

In sum, Ontario school board based researchers felt the need to know more than the proportion of students are leaving school before graduation. For analytical purposes we needed to know something of the conditions of their leaving before we could agree on the dimensions of the problem or seek appropriate solutions.

Practical Considerations

In addition to such definitional problems, there were practical problems relating to who gets counted as a dropout. A number of factors seem to impact on the way demissions are monitored and recorded, including lack of knowledge, central versus school based data collection, vested interest, and lack of follow up to verify the information. For example:

1. A number of the boards that responded to AERO's request for information indicated that they applied Ministry of Education definitions in designating a student as a dropout. However, it was sometimes apparent from the context that the respondent was unaware of the system of codes set out by the Ministry. Making matters worse, even if you know them, the various departure codes are not mutually exclusive, and the person assigning the code in a particular situation may not know which code to select either because the choices are not

clear or because they don't know the facts of a particular case. Under these conditions it would not even be possible to identify the origin of the error;

2. School based recording of dropout information tends to be able to support a broader set of categories than board based recording. This seems particularly true in smaller schools where someone in the school is more likely to know what has actually become of a departed student. When the EDP secretary or other person responsible for entering the demission code was unaware of the circumstances of a student's departure, a variety of colorful guessing strategies were employed to ensure that some departure code was entered;

3. Reporting schemes based on September principals' reports tend to increase the reporting of dropouts. Because these "September Reports" are used to determine a schools final teacher allotment, they are inclined to include students whose attendance at the school is a little uncertain. If the students evaporate later on, well that's life.

4. Students who complete grade 12 and then return to complete their OAC courses (Ontario Academic Credits - required pre-university courses) but later change their minds and leave before completing these courses present an interesting challenge. They present both a practical and a theoretical conundrum in that they are simultaneously graduates and high school dropouts. It seems that most boards, in fact, report them as dropouts.

In response to these findings, AERO issued a report of the committee's deliberations. The committee's report was sent to the research officers in all member school boards and also to the Ministry of Education explaining the problems that had been identified and giving recommendations regarding definitions and procedures for standardizing the collection of data on early school leavers.

Recommendations

In any discussion of dropout data, indicate the definition the procedure that was used to collect the data.

To facilitate the gathering of data on dropouts it would be beneficial for the Ministry of Education to promulgate a simple, clear set of demission codes and procedures for recording this information that could be applied province wide.

Procedures should be put in place at the school board level to periodically monitor and verify both formal demissions and prolonged absences. As part of this process the departing students should receive information on ways of re-entering the educational system, and on the variety of job training programs available in the community and province.

PART TWO

When it finally came, The Radwanski report to the Minister of Education raised the issue of student retention to a new high public profile. It reported that the dropout rate across the Province of Ontario to be in the area of 33%, and of course my own local school board wanted to know how its 17,000 high school students compared with this provincial figure.

Having arrived at a common set of definitions with my AERO colleagues, I returned to the data available from my own board. The number of dropouts for the year ending Oct 1, 1987 was obtained in the following way. A list of students having a withdrawal date between Sept 30/86 and Sept 30/87 was generated by Computer Services. From this group they eliminated all those having either a "certificate gained" code indicating formal high school completion, or a withdrawal code indicating transfer to another school. This left a list of 1800 students.

The students remaining on the list were contacted by telephone and interviewed (363 could not be contacted). From the students interviewed we eliminated 56 students who indicated that they had been continuously attending the same OBE school as full time regular students, and 395 more who indicated that they had in fact graduated.

In total, 958 students who left OBE schools between Oct. 1, 1986 and Sept. 30, 1987 and neither transferred to another school nor received a diploma or certificate were interviewed by OBE research staff. The following information relates to these early school leavers on whom we were able to collect data.

As is often the case with this sort of survey research it is not always possible to get all information on all subjects. Once engaged in the interview process, many of these former students had personal stories to relate and were exceedingly glad that someone from the school system was interested in what had become of them. Interviewers sometimes found it inappropriate in the face of these stories to ask all of the intended questions. Although this lead to some obvious gaps in the data, the information available proved, nevertheless to be of value to the board.

A number of important if not surprising points could be demonstrated by the data:

1. General (non-college track) level students were far more likely to drop out of high school than Advanced (college track) level students. Although General level students account for only 22% of OBE enrolment, they made up fully 53% of the dropouts. Basic level students who account for 6% of our enrolment were also over-represented making up 10% of the dropout group.

2. Overall, two-thirds of students who leave school withdraw in mid-term, but among students withdrawing from the Basic level courses this figure reaches 89%.

3. After withdrawing from high school, former students follow a variety of paths. These are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Activities Since Leaving School

Immediate Job Entry	312 (32.6)
Later Job Entry	139 (14.5)
Immediate Ed./Training Entry	270 (28.2)
Later Ed./Training Entry	196 (20.5)
	917 (95.7)
Both Work and Study	- 189 (19.7)
	728 (76.0)
Neither Work Nor Study	+ 210 (21.9)
	938 (97.9)
Missing Data	20 (2.1)
	958 (100)

4. Cross tabulating "activities since leaving" by program revealed that students leaving from the General level are most likely to go directly into an employment situation, while students departing the A level will be most likely to go directly to some other educational or training situation. Students leaving from the B level are least likely to find either work or study situations for themselves after early school leaving.

5. A number of students who were listed as dropouts reported that in fact they were pushed out or left as the result of "informal suspensions".

6. Many students who wanted to return to the school they had quit were advised that they were not welcome to do so.

7. Many students who wished to return to any school had no idea at all of how to re-enter the system.

8. Many leaving students had little or no idea of other community services that might help them with either further education, employment or social services.

Of the 958 people in our sample, the group of perhaps the greatest societal concern are the 210 who report that they are neither studying nor working. Of these 14 reported that they left school because of pregnancy or motherhood. The rest seem completely at loose ends and have still not found "an appropriate setting" in which to establish themselves as adults. If we wish to make special interventions to help our former students, this may well be the most important group to target for service. At the same time, we recognize that this is also the hardest group to serve.

IMPACTS AND EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

Beyond identifying additional weaknesses in the data collection process, the interviews provided us with important information which was shared with senior administrators, principals, and teachers. Although Ottawa is very much an upper middle class, high achieving, government oriented community with an apparent dropout rate less than half the provincial average, the presence of local data put an end to the response that there was no local problem.

Perhaps most importantly, the information was provided to the newly formed Student Retention and Transition Committee on which the Research Department is represented. Partly in response to the data, a number of initiatives have now been implemented:

1. Universal use of the Decisions questionnaire at the grade 9 level to identify students who are at serious risk of dropping out;

2. The development of student mentoring programs in nearly all high schools;

3. In-service training of vice principals in both "exit counselling" and ways of dealing with difficult students other than suspension;

4. The establishment of a data base on early school leavers; and

5. The development of exit packages which are now given or sent to all withdrawing students to advise them about the educational and community services available to them and ways that they can make a "soft re-entry" to the school system when and if they so desire.